



MTABC Student Scholarship Award

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**The Role of Massage Therapy
in Post-operative Care**

The integration of massage therapy into post-operative programs in hospital settings is a relatively new aspect of healthcare, the effects of which have stimulated promising scientific research. Studies have shown that incorporating massage into patient's post-operative care can have a positive impact on patient recovery (Wang, Sundt III, Cutshall, Cordes, & Bauer, 2010). However, other studies have provided inconclusive results. Research into the frequency, intensity and timing of massage therapy post-operatively are lacking. Due to the fact that results are promising and many questions are still pending, this topic requires further investigation.

In controlled settings, massage therapy has been proven to decrease pain, anxiety, heart rate, and blood pressure while increasing blood flow, endorphins, serotonin, and dopamine (Wang et al., 2010; Moraska, Pollini, Boulanger, Brooks, & Teitlebaum, 2010; Kaye et al., 2008). Research suggests that benefits of massage therapy, both physically and psychologically, post-surgery, contribute immensely to the healing process (Adams, White and Beckett, 2010). Participants of a study conducted by Adams and colleagues (2010) were subjected to 15-45 minute massage treatments post-surgery. Reported mean pain scores decreased post-massage. The majority of research participants commented that they reached a higher state of relaxation and emotional well-being, among other benefits, post-massage, leading to a perceived faster recovery period. Additional studies have proven that massage therapy decreases heart rate, blood pressure, fatigue, nausea, and depression in the postoperative period (Dion et al., 2011). The benefits of massage are not only limited to the adult population, as promising effects have been documented in hospitalized neonates where infant massage has led to increased weight gain, alertness and activity (Bauer et al., 2010).

Several research studies on the use of massage therapy post-operatively have focused on cardiac surgery patients. For example, a study conducted by Wang et al. (2010) consisted of a randomized group who received a massage between postoperative day two-to-five and a control group that experienced only quiet time during the same period. Patient feedback showed that pain, anxiety, and tension were reduced more greatly in the massage group than in the control group, but the difference was not statistically significant ($p = 0.08$). However, due to positive feedback, a further study was undertaken. Here, a second massage was conducted on the randomized group on postoperative day two and four and quiet time was maintained for the control group (Wang et al., 2010). There was a significant ($p = 0.001$) decrease in pain, anxiety, and tension for the randomized group as compared to the control group. Due to these results, the Division of Cardiovascular Surgery at the Mayo Clinic has now included routine massage therapy for patients receiving cardiac procedures (Wang et al., 2010). As well, Wang et al. (2010), indicate that based on the positive results obtained on the cardiac ward at the Mayo clinic, thoracic and colorectal departments have conducted similar studies and integrated massage therapy as part of routine care for their patients.

As a registered nurse myself who has worked primarily in cardiac surgery, I can attest first hand to the benefits provided to patients by massage therapy during post-operative care, particularly on a psychological level. Pain relief and increased comfort suggested by patient reports after massage therapy is astonishing. My experience leads me to firmly believe that massage can and should be used as a positive therapy for post-

operative recovery.

As demonstrated above, integrating registered massage therapy into multidisciplinary teams in the hospital setting may greatly aid in post-operative patient recovery. Given the potential benefits, research into the timing and duration of massage therapy post-operatively should be a priority for future endeavors in the field.

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